

# ACADEMIC, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS: CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

The main precept of the current study was to explore first-year students' academic, social and economic experiences at a University of Technology (pseudonym: University of Hard Knocks (UHK)). In response to the research questions, the study sought to interrogate the challenges faced by students by finding out whether they would choose the university again given a second chance, and if not why not. It also sought to establish how students would like the institution to improve in order to enhance first-year students' experiences (FYSE). The approach

applied was both quantitative and qualitative to allow students to reveal their experiences of the university, while simultaneously expressing such perceptions in descriptive format (for the quantitative part). Guided by Tinto's (2013) student departure theory, data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires distributed and sent through invites to all 16 000 first (1<sup>st</sup>) year students – which served as the population. However, rested upon the research questions for the current study and given that the instrument used was semi-structured, data was received from participants totally 4020 for the quantitative aspect (mainly descriptive). Of this sample (4020), and for the purpose of the current research questions, forty (40) participants were further selected randomly, to evaluate their responses as directed and coordinated by the current research objectives. The results revealed that to ensure appropriate economic and social integration, efforts should be made to automate and secure university processes and, most importantly, provide accredited/licensed accommodation. To achieve effective academic integration systems, learning space and the lack of transparency in accommodation allocations should be addressed. It is therefore recommended that UHK considers economic, social and academic integration processes and procedures to improve the campus experience.

**Keywords:** academic and social integration, academic development, first year experience, student access, university dropout

## INTRODUCTION

While there are several debates on University students' experiences, particular reference has been extended to (1) model used in unpacking such experiences and (2) a growing trend on first year students' experiences. A case in point as indicated by Tinto (2013) is the centrality of both (1) model and (2) first year students experiences simultaneous dependency on educational systems (institutional experience) such as academic, social and economic integration. What is meant is that institutional experiences are directly influenced by social and academic integration. Thus, successfully graduating, is conditioned, not only on say academic work, but predicated upon successfully participating in the student culture. Consequently, it is argued that successful graduation is influenced by factors such as (1) taking part in extra-mural works (2) feeling accepted with peers, (3) cognitively guided by and connected with teachers. Besides the position of Tinto (2013), an editorial review by Moja, Luescher, and Schreiber (2016) also categorised the conceptualisation of first-year students' experiences (FYSE) into the three theoretical fields, which usually form the basis for most argumentation. Inspired by two previous researchers, namely, Tinto (2014) and Schlossberg (2006), Moja et al. (2016, 2307) advance the following notion:

- The first conceptualisation is the “adjustment frameworks of student retention and persistence,” which essentially focuses on students' adjustment in terms of behaviours,

cognition, personal function and attitudinal change in order to adjust to the new demands of the higher education context, or at least, first-year students experience transition shock (TS) or reality shock (RS).

- The second concerns “stage models of student progression in which the first year experience (FYE) forms one stage through which students need to progress in order to engage with the undergraduate studies and to transition to work or postgraduate studies”. Also, any deviance from this leads to TS/RS.
- The third, which refers to “enabling equitable participation in undergraduate studies,” suggests “epistemological access to higher education” and fundamentally addresses the epistemological disposition of FYSE, wherein, any nonconformity from the three notable conceptions leads to TS/RS.

Similar to Tinto’s (2013) and in line with the trend of thought as alluded to by Moja et al. (2016), Brinkworth et al.’s (2008, 1) work in “first-year expectations and experiences” also attributes reasons, for instance selection of a degree, and for that matter a university, may include “degrees [type], quality of teacher feedback and perceived impact of outside commitments”. It is also suggested that “student expectations, student experience, and teacher views, similarities across ... degree programs” could be drivers of the conceptualisations of FYSE, which are akin to Tinto’s (2013) student departure theory.

What could be drawn from the assessment this far is that worldwide, research on the transition from upper secondary school to university has started to receive increasing attention over the past few decades with fluctuating and disconcerting outcomes (Brinkworth et al. 2008; Speckman and Mandew 2014; Tinto 2013).

However, like Brinkworth et al.’s (2008) study, which was conducted in North America and Europe, most research tends to report on findings positioned within the North America and Europe regions. Although the situation in Africa is also receiving noteworthy attention, it appears the accomplishments in economic, social and academic integration processes and procedures are far and few. For instance, as described by Tinto (2013), academic integration only does not significantly play a role in integration processes and procedures regarding transition from upper secondary school to university. By contrast, formal (informal) social and economic integration (1) tend to affect one’s study progress and (2) accordingly a fundamental predictor of one’s study process.

The unestablished position thus is that integrating academic, social and economic factors tend to have direct effect and consequently key models on learning environment on study progress. Consequently too, the academic, social and economic integration, which tend to be

the three favoured models of understanding first year context are considered the constructive conditions affecting; study programs, cultural/linguistic/historical oppression, pedagogical experiences, as well as epistemological or curriculum issues. For instance, in recent times and in Kenya's higher education institutions (HEIs), an examination of "... sample of 136 academic staff, 340 students and 34 staff of quality assurance directorates" by Kagondu and Marwa (2017, 23) recommended the need to strengthen both economic and social mechanisms in the higher education institutions (HEIs). Another East African report by Egesah and Wahome (2017, 56) highlighted views of graduates from Moi University and came to the realisation that "... to improve teaching and learning at Moi University..." attention should be focused on "... study conditions, study provisions and study programmes". Egesah and Wahome's (2017, 43) analysis also sounded a cautionary note for the need to increase "... practical, field, outreach and skills and competencies-based teaching and learning ...". In places such as West Africa too, with particular focus on Cameroon, Konings (2009, 211) reports that constraints were motivated in part by "... deep feelings among the Anglophone student community of being more oppressed and marginalized than their Francophone counterparts, owing to their Anglophone identity, by the Francophone-dominated post-colonial state".

While that has been the case as demonstrated by Brinkworth et al. (2008) in North America and Europe, by Kagondu and Marwa (2017) and Egesah and Wahome (2017) in East Africa and by Konings (2009) from West Africa, a consensus held in South Africa and for that matter in Africa is growing uneasiness among HEI students in general, but particularly first years.

In response to such uneasiness, and regardless of these forms of conceptualisation as suggested by both Tinto (2013) and Moja et al. (2016), Brinkworth et al.'s (2008, 1) findings call for "non-specialised transition programs to meet the needs of first-year students and facilitate the transition from secondary to tertiary education."

Consequently, situated within the work of Moja et al. (2016) and a reaction in the form of a response to Brinkworth et al. (2008), the current research interrogates first-year students' experiences at a university. This is achieved by exploring the academic, social and economic challenges faced by students that may affect their decision to choose the university again given a second chance. The research also interrogates the opinions of students regarding how the institution could improve in order to enhance FYSE. In part too, this study pivots on a study by Lekena and Bayaga (2018), which sought to analyse and describe students' total experience in their first year of study at a University of Technology in South Africa. The current study addressed themes, questions and previous work arising from themes predominately discussed by Van Zyl (2015), Scott (2008), Letseka and Maile (2008),

Bigger (2016), Ogude, Kilfoil, and Du Plessis (2012), Speckman and Mandew (2014), as well as Garza and Bowden (2014). These themes apply to both the academic and social integration of Tinto's (2013) systems and include, but not exclusively so, university residence, academic support, extra classes/tutorials, learning spaces, library and electronic resource centre (ERC), orientation and security system. The study further explored how the students need to be supported to be able to adjust to the new environment in order to develop and grow.

In the context of the research, the current study was situated within the Faculty of Humanities at a University of Technology, which was given the pseudonym University of Hard Knocks (UHK). Following the description of the context and outline of the current research, we present a review of the background to FYSE at university by addressing students' experiences as they transition from school to university. The researchers interrogate the academic, social and economic challenges faced by students. The investigation is conducted by finding out why participants would not choose the university again given a second chance. The researchers further explore the opinions of students. Such exploration regarded how to improve the institution in order to enhance first years academic, social and economic experiences.

## **BACKGROUND ON FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE – LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK**

To delineate the current work from the previous and to avoid retelling same story and simultaneously for recall purpose, the previous research from Lekena and Bayaga (2018, 1) sought to: (1) “establish the experience of first-year students within the first few weeks of their studies, and (2) identify some of the problems that the first-year students experience within the first few weeks of their study.” To recap, Lekena and Bayaga's (2018) findings, among others, included that late registration accounted for some of the reason's students did not attend orientation even though there was a desire to attend. The findings also revealed that students had no idea of the location of student development support (SDS) on campus, which tended to question the point of there being a support/service centre. In addition, a significant proportion (1187 (31.8%)) of the participants experienced difficulties with transport. In addition to the findings of the previous study, there have been number of preceding studies such as elaborated shortly and hence the need to link previous research, while concurrently articulating the current in the context of other prior studies.

Research conducted in the decades leading up to Lekena and Bayaga (2018) includes the work of Gardner (1986) in the mid-1980s. Gardner (1986) pointed out with concern that universities had already adopted divergent models of student support services (SSS) designed to provide a “rite of passage.” This has been reiterated more recently by Penn-Edwards and

Donnison (2011, 567) as well as Shange (2015). This variance in the form of models of SSS may have led to the findings of Lekena and Bayaga (2018), which indicate that students could not locate the SDS. What this means is that students within universities are received, reinforced, and eventually integrated into the campus using different approaches. This is also a strong indication that transition to university is still a big hurdle for some students to overcome in South Africa. Like the findings of Lekena and Bayaga (2018), other studies have highlighted the difficulties that first-year students experience at university. Such studies include Scott (2008), Council on Higher Education (2014), Letseka and Maile (2008), Ogude et al. (2012), Speckman and Mandew (2014) and Garza and Bowden (2014). However, taking into account both the academic and social integrations of Tinto (2013), recently there has been an increase in academic support provided to first-year university students on a global scale through first-year experience offices (Van Zyl 2015). This conception of the first-year being a difficult hurdle to overcome contrasts with the old-fashioned perception of the first year of university being exciting, liberating and confidence boosting (Van Zyl 2015; Bigger 2016; Ogude et al. 2012; Bitzer 2009; Tinto 2006).

Regardless of the considerable increase in academic support for first-year university students, Lekena and Bayaga (2018) established that transitioning from school to university may be difficult as many first-year students are often ill prepared for the change. Additionally, the first year could be quite daunting for many students given the new responsibilities and challenges which are in many instances overwhelming. Nonetheless, while not firmly accounted for, another point is the case of attrition rates, as the problem of high attrition and the reasons for high attrition rates are varied and increase at first-year level. Thus, considering the research objectives, this research explored why first-year students' transitions are particularly troublesome. This was done by exploring their academic, social and economic experiences and the way they negotiated these experiences regardless of their backgrounds (Speckman and Mandew 2014; Garza and Bowden 2014). A survey of first-year university students' experience by Brinkworth et al. (2008), and also indicated by the conceptualisation of Moja et al. (2016, 2307), suggests that "transitioning to university is not easy for many students". It is also reported that while students often know that university is going to be different from school, they have no idea what kind of a difference to expect. Furthermore, student responses reported by Brinkworth et al. (2008, 157) indicate that a successful transition is not solely due to academic ability, but also depends on students' ability to make a rapid adjustment to the new learning environment, which in this case forms part of the objective of the current research, which is in line with social integration systems as pointed by Tinto (2013).

Drawn from the aforementioned studies, various researchers tend to highlight a call for

universities to have formal transition programmes (SSS and SDS) aimed at orientating students to and helping them navigate higher education. In the current study, the authors pay specific attention to the challenges associated with such orientation. Lekena and Bayaga (2018) stress the importance of affording the first year of university study attention in the form of research, as currently there is a lack of understanding of the first-year experience, which makes it difficult for universities to offer appropriate support systems.

### **[LACK OF] UNDERSTANDING OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS EXPERIENCE OF THE TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY**

It is an accepted fact that first-year university students may experience transitional shock and academic and social difficulty as they move from high school to university (Krause et al. 2005). Krause et al.'s (2005) 2004 survey of Australian first-year students found that about 60 per cent of first-year students were ill-prepared for university and tended to experience an early "reality shock" (RS) when their first semester marks began to come in. While some have attributed the RS to inadequate academic, social and economic integration, to date, the reasons for these are not clear and have not been fully investigated (Speckman and Mandew 2014; Garza and Bowden 2014). In fact, McInnis (2001) laments that a sizable number of first-year students actually find themselves in difficulties once they begin university courses due to transitional shock.

One of the reasons offered by Krause et al. (2005) and backed by the views of Parker et al. (2004) is that on entry to a university, first-year students are confronted with new personal and interpersonal challenges that include the need to establish new relationships, develop study skills and modify existing relationships with parents and their families, with any deviance from this norm or standard constituting reality shock. They also have difficulty adjusting to the different styles of teaching compared to school. The views of Krause et al. (2005) and Parker et al. (2004) are consistent with Adler et al.'s (2008) assertion that adjustment to university is critical for academic success. In fact, it is increasingly believed that unsuccessful university adjustment correlates with poor academic performance, low graduation rates and limited success later in life.

In conclusion and drawn from Krause et al. (2005) and Parker et al. (2004), it may be asserted therefore that a growing body of literature shows that the transition from high school to university remains a major concern globally. Given these challenges, the current study sought to address the research topic by taking guidance from the research objectives, which are formulated in the next section.

Based on the discussion this far, the inclination is to interrogate number of issues that

included but not exclusively; the academic, social and economic challenges faced by students. The need to examine such issues is largely because, those challenges affect participants in variety of ways in terms of choice of the university as well as the need to also explore opinions of students. This is particularly needed regarding how to improve the institution and to enhance first years academic, social and economic experiences. Considering the background and the concerns of the study, Tinto's (2013) student departure theory was applied to address the research questions.

### **Research questions**

The research questions of this study thus sought to examine:

- How do academic, social and economic challenges faced by students affect students' choices given a second chance to choose the university?
- What opinions of students could improve the institution in order to enhance first years academic, social and economic experiences?

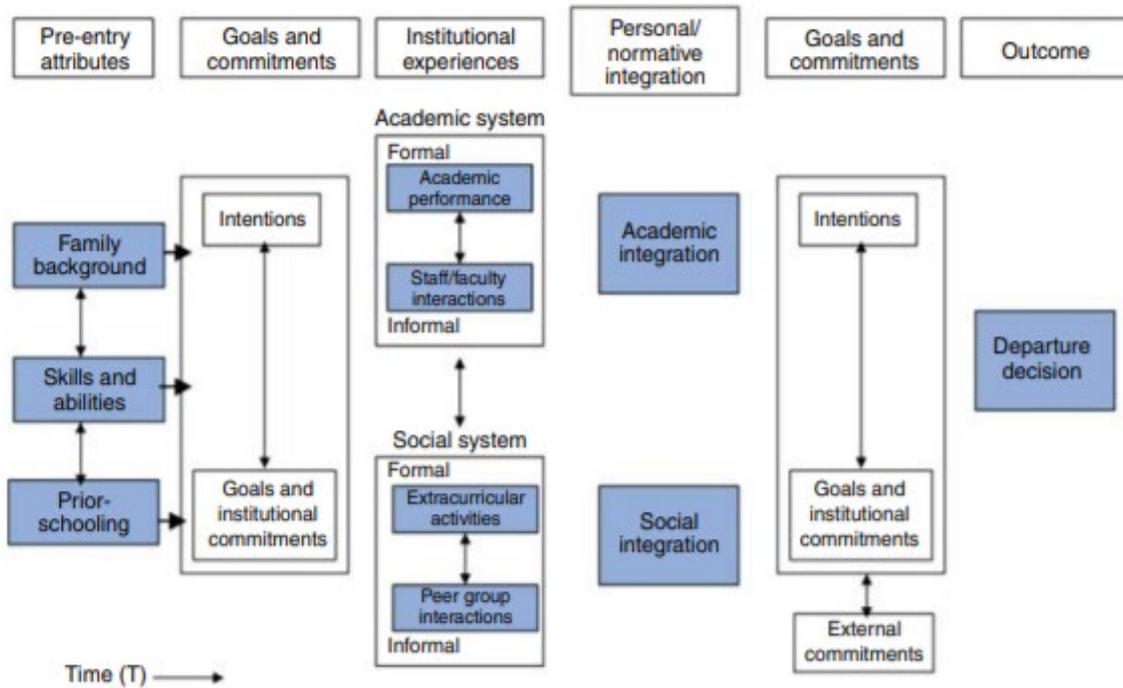
### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Evidence from Scott (2008), Letseka and Maile (2008), Ogude et al. (2012), Speckman and Mandew (2014) suggests that Tinto's (2013) student departure theory has been the theory of choice when conducting FYSE research. Based on the exploratory nature of the research questions and since it is primarily directed towards the experiences of respondents, the authors were guided by Tinto's (2013) student departure theory, which is aimed at and used in exploring contextual challenges (cf. Figure 1) faced by students. The researchers also interrogated via Tinto's (2013) student departure theory, the perceptions of students with regard to how they would like to see the institution improve in order to enhance their experience. Additionally, and as reflected in Figure 1, the theory is used to explain and describe how features of first-years' experience is influenced.

Drawing from Krause et al. (2005) and Parker et al. (2004), another reason for the choice of Tinto's theory is because, the theory identifies the social and academic integration of first-year students as having prognostic effects on how well, or not, they can battle the challenges of integration into higher education. Thus, the findings of this study will be mapped onto the theory (as far as possible) for explanatory and descriptive purposes.

Figure 1 is an illustration of Tinto's theory of student departure. From the theory, it is expected that first-year students need to be integrated properly into the system. It is likewise expected that such students do not solely depend on academic ability, but also on the ability to

adjust to the learning environment as supported by Tinto (2013) and articulated in previous sections of the current research.



**Figure 1:** A longitudinal model of institutional departure (Tinto 2013)

## METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

### General Background

The current study examined first-year students’ experiences within the Faculty of Humanities in their first six to eight weeks of enrolling at a university (UHK) in South Africa. Ethical considerations based on confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to in order to meet the ethical protocols of the university in regard to the respondents. Considering the studies of Letseka and Maile (2008), Van Zyl (2015) and Scott (2008), the questions were designed to elicit information on the challenges faced by students. They also focused on why students would not choose the university in question given a second chance. The questions or themes also sought to explore the perceptions of students regarding institutional improvements that would improve their experience.

### Instrument and procedures

The current study was based on first year students’ experience at a university in South Africa. Rested upon the research questions, a questionnaire was used as the data collection tool. Data was collected through a survey using anonymous, paper-based, semi-structured questionnaires.

Questions were both quantitative and qualitative in nature and allowed for students to express their opinions and perceptions on their experience. The themes principally comprised extended answer questions on participants total experience as directed by the research questions.

### **Sample selection**

Guided by Tinto's (2013) student departure theory, data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires distributed and sent through invites to all 16 000 first (1<sup>st</sup>) year students – which served as the population. However, rested upon the research questions for the current study and given that the instrument used was semi-structured, data was received from participants totally 4020 for the quantitative aspect (mainly descriptive). Of this sample (4020), and for the purpose of the current research questions, forty (40) participants were further selected randomly, to evaluate their responses as directed and coordinated by the current research objectives. The respondents (all names are pseudonym) (40 respondents in total), were further sampled (11) from the 40 (thus not all 40 were not used), asserted various positions as elaborated further in the results section of the current study.

Generally, data were collected from classes using stratified random sampling, paying particular attention to the academic and social integration systems (ASIS). The quantitative data was scanned and analysed using Evasys software, while the qualitative data was analysed by means of content analysis based on the ASIS. Participants, who were first year students collected questionnaire using a one-page paper-based questionnaire guided by the research questions. The student participants were provided no incentive whatsoever to participate.

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis process was through thematization, including number of steps. The first was to examine coding structures of the themes as reflected in the research questions. The researchers then compared the themes with those from the data. This was followed by identifying and recognising similar, different, and missing constructs. Such identification and recognition processes ensured that the researchers maintained trustworthiness of results. Finally, such themes were developed and employed in the current study, which included the academic, social and economic challenges faced by students in terms of choice of the university. It also explored the opinions of students regarding how to improve the institution and to enhance first years' academic, social and economic experiences.

## **RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

This current section presents the results of the study in accordance with the main themes of the

research questions. The research questions are recapped for ease of reference: Thus, (1) How do academic, social and economic challenges faced by students affect students' choices given a second chance to choose the university? (2) What opinions of students could improve the institution in order to enhance first years academic, social and economic experiences?

### **Social and economic integration**

The majority of the students, that is, 92.7 per cent of those surveyed, said that they had made friends at the university. Eighty-four per cent (84.6%) of the respondents had attended their faculty/departmental orientation programme. Of those who had attended, 71.8 per cent, 18.6 per cent average and 9.6 per cent poor or very poor. A little over half (56.9%) of the respondents stated that they would like some orientation-type activities to be repeated later in the year. When asked whether they felt at home at the university or not, 76.7 per cent said that they felt at home. The majority of the students, 80.9 per cent, had not attended or participated in any sports events. Most of the students, 84.4 per cent of the 531 respondents, indicated that they had not joined any clubs/associations yet, although 15.6 per cent had done so. More than three-quarters of the respondents, 78.6 per cent, stated that they understood how the university works. Just over half (55.5%) had spoken to a lecturer, similarly, 52.4 per cent had spoken to a tutor or mentor. Students displayed high affinity to the university, as 82 per cent reported that they would still choose it again given a second chance regardless of the challenges they had faced thus far. The majority of the students (88.2%) also stated that they knew what was expected of them by the lecturers. In addition, 64.1 per cent of the respondents were worried about their term/semester tests.

Some of the respondents alluded to the fact that living far from the campus was expensive, unsafe and negatively affected their studies as they spent a lot of their time on the road as opposed to studying. The respondents (all names are pseudonym) also expressed their discontent with the alleged lack of transparency in allocating accommodation by the university. In support of this, various respondents even though not an exhaustive list (40 respondents in total), wherein a representative sample (11) from the 40 (as all the 40 could not have been used in the current research) asserted the following, noting that all names used are pennames:

“Accommodate all first-year students at res.” (John).

“They should provide residence for the students who are staying off campus for their safety to avoid late coming at school.” (Afrika).

“They have to build more residence we are suffering because when coming to school they rob us along the way.” (Lam).

“Lumumba (respondent) indicated that ‘... must improve their residence to accommodate all the

students because some of us we staying too far. I have to spend R150 per day to come to school’.”

“Ben (respondent) noted, ‘by providing residence that can accommodate many students on average of 60–70% of students, as we fear for our safety’.”

Respondents also stated that they often miss classes due to transport delays. When they do arrive eventually at class, the respondents mentioned that they are often tired and, hence, do not absorb as much as they could have if they lived on campus. The assertions of respondents John, Afrika, and Lam are in line with Kenyatta (all names are pennames). In terms of reasons attributed to attrition, it was noted that the transition to university can be problematic, as the following reasons put forward by respondents such as Lumumba:

### **Orientation, automation of systems and processes and others**

In the case of orientation for instance, students were generally negative towards the practice. Some of the reasons provided are that the orientation was too short and students did not have time to ask questions or to absorb everything all at once. John (a respondent) lamented that:

“Show me all corners of UHK by touring around the campus, they can call more and more orientations to cover students who didn’t and couldn’t attend the first orientations. Orientation must be before the commencement of classes. They would keep on giving us more orientations up until we settled well enough.”

On the other hand, respondent L in the current study asserted that:

“By orientating us more and maybe for more than three hours so that students can ask questions if they want to. If UHK would have taken us around the school during our orientation would have been far better but unfortunately we had to do that on our own, host another orientation later in the year so that we always have enough information about the UHK activities.”

As suggested by respondent L, students felt they needed mentoring to meet more personal and social needs and tutoring for academic purposes. The students also mentioned that they would like to interact more with their lecturers outside of class time.

### **Academic integration**

In support of Tinto’s (2013) work, respondents in the current study recounted that there is hardly any space to sit quietly and learn as all the classes, the library and its extension are always full. For instance, respondent K had this to say:

“It [the institution] can make sure that sometimes we do not attend in small classes because, [we] don’t pay attention rather to make noise, UHK needs to be enlarged for more space to accommodate all the students. Extend the UHK tech and office in order to accept a larger number of students and also have spare classroom for backup in the absence of another classroom being under construction etc.”

Comparable to respondents K, it was found that there are too few benches and chairs around the campus and thus students do not know where to wait for the next class. They also mentioned that group assignments are difficult because of the lack of relaxed learning spaces. For instance, respondent W had this to say in this regard:

“They should build more building (classes), UHK can improve their air-cons in every class due to the fact that the classes are very hot.”

Expansion of the library is another need mentioned by the first-year students. To this effect, respondent PP noted:

“They should monitor the computer lab, it’s always full and some students don’t use the computers for academic problems, instead some are busy watching soapies on YouTube. The library extension should be increased so that it can accommodate every student in this institution. Extend library or make more of them. Even computer labs are not enough for some of us who are doing ICT.”

Respondent PP’s point was supported by that of KX, indicating:

“Computer labs must always be available when student want to research, or they must extend the Computer labs. They must extend the space for library and lab. Supply us with more books at library, library is always full so I suggest that the school governing body [university management] look into this matter. Computer labs is [are] always full improve.”

Insufficient internet and computers were also raised as sources of poor experiences. Students stated that Wi-Fi should be strengthened and more computers and better working conditions should be supplied. Some of them mentioned the need for students to be given tablets upon registration. The need to “expand” campus and classrooms was mentioned as a way in which the institution could improve. The respondents complained about the overcrowded classrooms as well as the overcrowding generally on campus. They expressed how it is often too hot because of the number of people in class and the fact that the air conditioners seldom work.

## **DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY**

### **Social and economic integration**

In line with the themes as directed by the research questions and the studies of Van Zyl (2015), Scott (2008), Council on Higher Education (2014), Letseka and Maile (2008) and Brinkworth et al. (2008) as well as Tinto’s (2013) student departure theory, the current study found, via a respondent referred to as Lamat (a pseudonym) that students initially chose, and then stayed

within, their programmes for very similar reasons. Interest was by far the largest factor in selecting and continuing in a degree programme. Though not fully accounted for by Letseka and Maile (2008) and Ogude et al. (2012), this is encouraging and serves as a good foundation that the university could build on as it reflects the eagerness of students to obtain extra support that might help them succeed in their studies. The assertions of respondents John, Afrika, Lam and Kenyatta are in line with the work of Brinkworth et al. (2008). In terms of reasons attributed to attrition, Letseka and Maile (2008) and Ogude et al. (2012) note that the transition to university can be problematic, as the following reasons put forward by some of the respondents such as Fati indicate: Fati indicates; “build other buildings and make sure that every student get[s] financial assistance for residences”. Drawing from the responses of Lumumba, Fati and Kenyatta, a further issue may be identified, namely, that students sometimes do not have money for transport to get to campus. Another reason cited by Scott (2008) and Garza and Bowden (2014), and also evidenced in the current research, was that the accommodation they secure outside the university often does not have amenities such as electricity, running water and internet connectivity, which means they cannot study comfortably and optimally.

Respondents criticised the lack of free tablets and strong and widely available Wi-Fi connectivity on the university premises. Employing the lens of Tinto’s theory, lack of accommodation for students might lead to students dropping out or failing academically due to a lack of social and academic integration. It could be asserted too that lack of accommodation makes the students feel they do not belong to the institution. These challenges might facilitate the decision to leave the institution. This negative phenomenon contrasts with the argument made by Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) that a sense of belonging and academic integration has a positive effect on student retention and success.

### **Orientation, automation of systems and processes and others**

Analogous to the study of Brinkworth et al. (2008) and suggested by Tinto’s (2013) work on social integration, factors such as sporting facilities and entertainment and interaction with lecturers outside of class time and orientation have a significant effect on departure decisions. Brinkworth et al. (2008, 159) found that “commencing students had very strong (90%) expectations before starting university”. Consistent with Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011), Students also felt that the current manual system of waving/showing their student cards to security personnel at the university gate to gain access is outdated and causes unnecessary tension between students and security. They would prefer an automated system where they could just scan their cards and get through the gate.

## **University residences, academic systems: Learning spaces, library and electronic resource centre (ERC)**

Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) reflected on student access and success and, like Tinto (2013), are strong advocates of residence. In line with Tinto's (2013) theory, one issue that was ranked very high by students and that needs addressing is the fact that classes are too big in terms of student numbers while the physical size of the lecture rooms themselves is so small that many of them have to sit outside and do not even have a chance to consult with lecturer, let alone to engage with the lesson or ask questions. The students reckoned that smaller tutorial sessions would help them improve and understand better.

Though not accounted for in Tinto's (2013) theory or Brinkworth et al.'s (2008) findings, the majority of the students are young (18–21) first-generation students who largely depend on financial assistance from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). This has huge implications for the institution in terms of the type of support the students need to successfully transition from school to university and succeed in their first year and beyond. Almost all (96%) the surveyed students lamented about the lack of university accommodation as the biggest barrier to their success. The findings relating to accommodation vary – compare the studies of Ogude et al. (2012), Speckman and Mandew (2014) and Garza and Bowden (2014).

In conclusion and considering the key themes; (1) academic, social and economic challenges faced by students do affect students' choices given a second chance to choose the university and (2) for opinions of students that could improve the institution in order to enhance first years academic, social and economic experiences, a number of assessments could be drawn: For instance, the respondents reported that they needed more academic support in the form of tutorials, learning spaces and mentorship to increase their chances of success. This view of the respondents is also consistent with Naylor, Baik, and Arkoudis' (2018, 329) findings on attrition. According to Naylor et al. (2018, 329), "attrition is often seen as a result of a complex interaction between incentives and disincentives". This aspect is confirmed in this study by the reasons respondents gave when asked why they would not choose this university again given a second chance. Research seldom considers learning spaces; however, in this study, unlike others (Bigger 2016), students also complained significantly about the lack of learning spaces on one of the campuses. Tinto's (2013) theory suggests that academic systems, which include learning spaces and libraries can lead to departure decisions.

## **CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

It is important to note that regardless of work done so far, specific strategies for increasing the

chances of successful retention still evade many in relation to FYSE. The current study is thus heeding the call for further research into FYSE. Following the research questions, it is implied that personal and interpersonal challenges of first-year students are key in smooth transitioning into university. It is therefore recommended that university of technologies consider economic, social and academic integration processes and procedures to improve the campus experience. What is key though is that student integration through appropriate social, economic and academic in other categories of universities other than university of technologies should be researched for a comprehensive understating of transition into university.

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